

# Bodhi or Enlightenment in the inner core of Buddhism as a Religion

*Professor Dhammavihari Thera*

Since I am making this contribution to the Mahabodhi Centenary Journal, I thought I would fittingly write something on the concept of *bodhi* or enlightenment in Buddhism. In this essay, I am completely divorced from the tree, with its associations, old and new. To the Buddhists anywhere in the world, particularly to those of the early Theravada tradition, the word *bodhi* which is related to the verb *bujjhati* which means comprehends, realizes and understands is of vital importance. The word *bodhi* means the knowledge thus acquired about the reality of life [*yathābhūta-pajānana*], understanding and comprehending. It is acquired through a transcendence in human life, from a grossly material to a religio-cultural ascent. It is for this reason that its derivative word *buddha* which means the enlightened one, is being primarily applied as an epithet to the Buddha, the historical personality who discovered himself the total truth about life through personal striving and cultivation.

It is our conviction that the earliest phase of Mahāyānic philosophic thinking did not wish leave this highest religio-philosophic achievement of Śākyamuni confined to a mere mortal in the person of Samaṇa Gotama who died and left the world totally at the age of eighty. They thought that his glorious achievement, his transcendental Buddha-ness exists wherever there is light, i.e. through space, as *Amitābhah* or Unlimited Light. Likewise the Buddha spreads through time as *Amitāyuh* or Unlimited Life. In both cases, he shall all the same exist as / in Unlimited Space and Unlimited Time, as the Buddha AMITA FO. Enlightened Mahayanists of today refer to Buddha Gotama of world history as Śākyamuni the Eternal Buddha.

It is important to indicate at the very outset that the primary tool of this

understanding which opens the door to Nirvana as the goal of salvation in the early tradition of the Theravada, is unmistakably referred to as *paññā* or *ñāṇa*. In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, we discover the additional words *vijjā* and *āloka* which also refer to the same states of vision and illumination respectively. These words collectively mean knowledge or wisdom. The Janavasabha Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya explains, under the heading *satta samādhi-parikkhārā*, the seven factors that lead to perfect concentration or harnessing of mind or *sammā samādhi* which is the final stepping stone or the basis for the acquisition of that wisdom. This relationship is indicated as 'perfect harnessing of mind leads to perfect wisdom, and perfect wisdom leads to perfect release': *sammā samādhissa sammā ñāṇaṃ pahoti sammā ñāṇassa sammā vimutti pahoti* [DN.II.217]. The way to this release, release from the cycle of births and deaths of *Saṃsāra*, is also called *bodhi* [note *añño maggo bodhāya* at MN.I.246].

Thus at the very outset, Buddhism shows itself to be a scheme of personal salvation where each one has to achieve one's goal individually and personally, beginning with one's own cultivation of moral goodness, with no refuge in the grace of an external power [*attāṇo loko anabhissaro* at MN.II.68]. This is the primary genesis, the start of the Buddhist religious life, basically via *sīla* [*sīle patitthāya*] through the cultivation of moral goodness. This is the goodness in human behaviour in word and deed and in the way one makes a living in the world. There is by no means any short circuiting or bypassing of this, at least within the Theravada tradition. Are we not familiar with a Buddhist phrasing where the three words *sammā vācā sammā kammanto sammā ājīvo* are listed together. They are none other than items 3, 4 and 5 of the Noble Eight-fold Path or Ariyo Aṭṭhaṅgiko Maggo. There is hardly any room for doubt that these three together cover almost the entire territory of human culture in a layman's life, man or woman.

It is of interest for us to note here that items 1 and 2 of the Path which immediately precede these are *sammā diṭṭhi* and *sammā saṅkappa*. In the

reference from the Janavasabha Sutta which we have quoted above, we should have taken adequate notice of the sequential nature of every item in the Path, from no.2 to no.8, each following one as deriving from the preceding one, the textual presentation being like *sammā diṭṭhissa sammā saṅkappo pahoti*, the verb *pahoti* carrying with it the meaning `gives rise to or generates. Thus it becomes clear that *sammā diṭṭhi* stands as the first item in the Path, with the recurrent phrase *sammā-diṭṭhi-pubbaṅgamā*, i.e. *sammā diṭṭhi* leads the way. This means, as far as we can argue, that *sammā diṭṭhi* initially opens the way to making a non-Buddhist a Buddhist. It opens the door to Buddhism, and gives access to those who seek to enter.

The Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta says without any ambiguity that *sammā diṭṭhi* [or this corrected vision as we call it] brings one within the fold of Buddhism: *āgato imaṃ saddhammaṃ* [MN.I.48]. It further says that *sammā diṭṭhi* straightens out one's vision: *ujugatā'ssa diṭṭhi* [loc. cit.]. But it must be remembered that *sammā diṭṭhi* does not carry with it the totality of wisdom or *paññā* which is needed for liberation from *Samsāra*. But at the same time, it is adequately clear that without *sammā diṭṭhi*, one would not even make a start and be on the Buddhist path to liberation. For these reasons, we consider it would be unwise to say that *sammā diṭṭhi* and *sammā saṅkappa* constitute the category of *paññā* in the three-fold division of *tisso sikkhā*. In this classification, they are only placed within that category [*yā ca sammā diṭṭhi yo caammā saṅkappo ime dhammā paññākkhandhe saṅgahitā*. MN.I.301]. Thus it would be correct to say that while *sammā diṭṭhi* marks the commencement of the process of enlightenment [*sammādiṭṭhi-pubbaṅgamā*], *paññā* [also referred to as *sammā ñāṇa*, lying beyond the Path] marks the conclusion or termination of the liberation process.

It is abundantly clear that one needs to go through six more stages on the path, from *sammā vācā* to *sammā samādhi*, i.e. from no. 3 to no. 8 to lay claims to that wisdom which is identifiable under the names *ñāṇaṃ* and *paññā*. Forget not that this *paññā* is placed as the final item in the three-fold division of *tisso*

*sikkhā*. *Tisso sikkhā* is declared to be a much larger division, including much more than the Eight-fold Path, including within it two more items beyond *sammā samādhi* [Ibid.]. It is emphatically stated there that the Eight-fold Path cannot contain within it the *tisso sikkhā* [*Na kho āvuso Visākha ariyena aṭṭhaṅgikena maggena tayo khandhā saṅgahitā*. Ibid.]. There is no mistaking that it is the *tisso sikkhā* which completes the process of enlightenment in *arhanthood*, but not the Eight-fold Path. The Eight-fold Path is only the Learners Pathway: *Iti kho bhikkhave aṭṭhaṅgasamannāgato sekho paṭipado* [MN.III.76].

Putting all three words *paññā*, *ñāṇa* and *bodhi* together, we would say that all these states of wisdom which they imply pertain to a transcendental-level achievement which alone, at that highest stage, unlocks the door to Nirvana. It is this transcendental vision which facilitates the release of the mind from the *Saṃsāra*-binding defilements: *paññāya c'assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti* [MN.I.160]. It finalizes the liberating process in Buddhism. It is, at this stage, and none other that the totally liberated *Viññāṇa* [*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ abbaso pabhaṃ* as at the Kevaḍḍa Sutta, DN.I.223] which is no longer *Saṃsāra*-prolonging. Consequently it brings about the total *nirodha* or cessation of the *Saṃsāric* process and *Saṃsāric* being [*viññāṇassa nirodhena etth' etaṃ uparujjhati*. Ibid.].

Thus it becomes clear that in Buddhism this enlightenment-wisdom or *bodhi* becomes the vital ingredient in the liberation process to Nirvana. In it lies the liberation potential or *bodhi citta*. It is with reference to this that the Mahāyānists speak of the presence of the *bodhi citta* in every being. It must be equally well remembered that at this stage it is the seed, and the seed alone. It needs all the circumstantially relevant proper grooming to germinate into a living plant to grow up to be the tree that it should finally be. Thus the emergence of the concept of the three-fold *bodhi* [Sinhala *tun-tarā-bodhi* of the Buddha, Pacceka Buddha and the arahant. They may be relatively larger or smaller trees. But it must be admitted that they all have to go through the gate way of wisdom- ripening in

*bodhi*. It is very generous to say with the Mahāyānists that it is already latent in every being. But the Theravādins are unequivocally firm in saying that `each one must personally develop it himself through one's own wisdom: *paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi*.

In this Theravāda Buddhist position of final liberation out of *Sam̐sāra* through wisdom, it is not to be forgotten through all the enthusiasm and exuberance in the world that there can be no leap-frog jump from the mundane to the transcendental, in quest of *bodhi*, without going through the three-fold culture of *tisso sikkhā* of *sīla samādhi* and *paññā* in their gradual sequence.